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CIA's Work Interred in a Vacuum

By Stewart Alsop

AMONG THE other decisions crowding in on President Eisenhower is one which is a great deal more important than it appears on the surface. He must approve or disapprove a proposal, which is before the National Security Council, for a new mechanism for measuring at all times just where this country and the Communist bloc stand in the cold war and the arms race.

The best way to understand the importance of this proposal is to recall the most dramatic and significant moment in the hearings before the Johnson Preparedness Subcommittee, when Intelligence Chief Allen Dulles was briefing the committee members.

The Senators listened glumly while Dulles recited the facts—that the Soviets had been testing ballistic missiles since 1952-53; that they had stockpiled hundreds of operational medium-range missiles; that the forward bases of the Strategic Air Force, except perhaps for the Spanish and Moroccan bases, were already subject to attack from operational Soviet IRBM sites; that the coastal areas of the United States were also subject to submarine-based missile attack; that the Soviets should have operational ICBMs and ICBM bases in the near future, and so on.

Then Sen. Stuart Symington, with an assist from other Senators, began asking the obvious questions. How long had the Central Intelligence Agency had such intelligence? The CIA began getting "hard" intelligence on Soviet missile progress as long ago as 1952, Dulles replied. Had the intelligence been made available to the National Security Council? Certainly. Why, then had our own missile effort actually been cut back?

Dulles replied frankly that the CIA had "not been able to impress the NSC with the impact of the intelligence" which the CIA had had "for some time." Why not? At this point, Dulles cited the basic law under which the CIA was created. It was not the function of the CIA, he pointed out, to compare United States capabilities and the capabilities of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the CIA was specifically enjoined from concerning itself with the American defense situation. The CIA was strictly confined to foreign intelligence.

THIS IS NOT, of course, the whole reason why the NSC was not "impressed with the impact" of the CIA's intelligence. The basic reason was that the men who dominated the NSC, like Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey and Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, did not want to be impressed.

If they had been impressed, as honest men and patriots (which both men are) they could not possibly have defended, to themselves or others, the policy of defense cutbacks which was central to the whole Administration program. And yet it is also true that the fact that the CIA is strictly limited to foreign intelligence made it far easier for men like Humphrey and Wilson to avoid being "impressed by the impact" of that intelligence.

For, in the fantastically complex structure of the American Government, there is no single body whose continuing, day-to-day function it is to examine objectively where we really stand in the cold war and the arms race. Thus the CIA's intelligence tends to be considered in a vacuum.

In the pre-sputnik era, for example, leading Administration spokesmen repeated over and over, like an incantation, that "we have never been stronger." In a literal sense, in the sense of total firepower available to the American armed forces, this was no doubt true. But in the only sense in which it had real meaning—in terms of the comparative power of this country and the Soviet Union—it was absolutely untrue.

BUT IT WAS EASY for the highest officials to believe their own complacent reassurances, because no one had the job of constantly comparing Soviet and American power in meaningful terms. Theoretically, this is the job of the NSC itself. But the members of the NSC are also the chief Government policy makers, and it is foolish in the nature of things to expect the policy makers to sit in judgment over their own policies.

Under the present system, there are only occasional and sporadic efforts to arrive at a balanced judgment of where we really stand. One such effort was represented by the now-famous report of the Gaither Committee.

There was no intelligence made available to the Gaither Committee which was not also available to the NSC. But because the Gaither Committee had no special interest in defending established policies, its members were profoundly "impressed by the impact" of the CIA's intelligence.

The proposal before the President amounts to a sort of continuing Gaither Committee. The new body would have no policy-making functions. Its function, instead, would be to keep a running box score on the cold war and the arms race, so that intelligence would no longer be considered in a vacuum. Its function, indeed, would be to keep rubbing the noses of the members of the NSC—including the President himself—in the real meaning of the facts collected by the CIA.